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ABSTRACT

An approach to teaching literary point of view to high school and college composition classes is described in this brief article. AUTHOR'S COMMENT (excerpt): My students demonstrate little understanding of the concept of point of view. They seem unaware that selecting a point of view is an important decision for a writer, because it controls the relationship between the writer, the reader, and the characters in a narrative. EXERCISES (excerpt): I ask each student to select a role--the paper rustler, the pencil dropper, the snoozer, the giggler, the note passer, the flirt, the egghead, the gum popper. Each student comes to the front of the class, stands behind the podium, and pretends to be the teacher. Once every student has become "the teacher," I ask them to write a description of the class from the teacher's viewpoint. Next I describe a particular situation; for example, a football game. One group describes the game from tne perspective of the quarterback, the coach of the losing team, a cheerleader. After each group has made a presentation to the class from its particular perspective, we discuss how point of view can affect the basic facts of a situation. (KC)

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A Switch in Point of View

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Level

High school and college composition

Author's Comment

Both in their writing and their reading my students demonstrate little understanding of the concept of point of view. They seem unaware that selecting a point of view is an important decision for a writer, because it controls the relationship between the writer, the reader, and the characters in a narrative. To make the concept of point of view very clear to my students, I help them to assume a different angle of vision from their own with two exercises.

Exercise I

I ask my students to help me stage a tableau of a typical, or rather stereotyped, English class. Each student selects a role—the paper rustler, the pencil dropper, the snoozer, Mr. Big Mouth, the whisperer, the giggler, the note passer, the daydreamer, the doodler, the paper airplane thrower, the flirt, the egghead, the gum popper, etc. At my signal they all begin their characteristic actions. Then alone or in small groups (depending upon the class size) I let each student come up to the front of the class, stand behind the podium, and pretend to be the teacher. I encourage them to get into the mindset of the teacher, to try to feel as the teacher would in facing such a class. Once every student has become "the teacher" for a moment or two, I ask them to write a description of the class from the teacher's viewpoint. They are free to choose any method they wish. Students can use a stream-of-consciousness technique and actually present the teacher's flow of thoughts. They can record a conversation between the teacher and another instructor. They can pretend they are the teacher writing a letter to a friend. They can write the teacher's diary entry. Any method is valid. The only requirement is that the students drop the student's view and try to perceive the class as if they were the teacher.

EXERCISE EXCHANGE: v26 n2 p31-32 Spring 1982

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Exercise II

To give my students further practice in thinking of point of view, I divide them into five groups. Then I give them a set of facts about a particular situation; for example, a football game. One group describes the game from the perspective of the quarterback who made the winning touchdown, another from the viewpoint of the coach of the losing team, a third from the point of view of a cheerleader for the home team, a fourth from the perspective of an alumnus who's come back to see how things have changed since the days when he was a football hero, the fifth from the viewpoint of Howard Cosell. After each group has made a presentation to the class of its particular perspective, we discuss how point of view can affect the basic facts of a situation—how some points of view are more objective than others, how point of view can reveal character traits.

Evaluation

I have found these two exercises to be very beneficial. First of all, they generate much enthusiasm in the class. Students appreciate a change in the class routine and participate eagerly in both the acting situation and the discussion of the different points of view. Second, the written descriptions of the class from the teacher's viewpoint are far more imaginative than the usual compositions, often employing such sophisticated literary tools as dialogue, irony, figurative language, humor, and interior monologue. Finally, these exercises enable me to establish the proper atmosphere for a presentation on literary point of view. After the exercises, we read and discuss several short stories with intriguing points of view. Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw" is a classic example and fascinates the students by raising the question of the reliability of the narrator. The results of these two exercises extend throughout the semester. After using them, I find my students attempting further experiments with point of view in their journals. I also find that they become more perceptive readers, as they begin to analyze the significance of how the storyteller chooses to tell a story.